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THEATRE

University Theatre on a roll

Review by Deborah S. McGee

Orphans

Orphans at University Theater puts me in a difficult spot as a reviewer.

I haven't written a more-negative-than positive review in a while. I'm due for that marvelous occasion when a critic smells something rotten, can warn readers. So I tremble a little telling you that *Orphans* is sublime. It's a gem of a play and U Theater's production wears an A as in amethyst.

Theater's greatest moments lie in such productions, which take receptive audience and willing players into a realm of now-ness, a shared experience that never again will occur.

Orphans has the power to touch deeply; it is about the basic human need for physical connections. The characters are seedy. If you saw one of them on the street, you'd avoid interaction. By the end of *Orphans*, though, you will have dipped into the well of compassion within.

There are some evident prob-

lems in the production. It would work better in Lane Community College's Blue Door/black box theater, for instance. In Robinson Theater, audience-to-player distance sometimes is too great to appreciate subtle gestures, both facial and bodily, from the superb actors.

Orphans tells of two motherless young men, who have fended for themselves in a North Philly slum, and have acquired by criminal means a new "roommate." Also motherless, the man is on the lam from Chicago gangsters.

Ay, that brings up another rub. Bob Barton as Harold, that new roommate, never comes across sinister enough. He does, however, show much skill in handling the subtler aspects of his character. Barton has the perfect touch and brings to life on stage a wonderful human being. I loved him.

Enrique Arias was not disappointing as Treat, the older brother. Arias connected together the play, the thing, the place, and the onlookers Saturday night. I

marvel any human could muster six such demanding performances.

As the younger, retarded brother Philip, Sean Morgan comes on a little too athletically at first. Then one begins to believe his character through the masterful details playwright Lyle Kessler sprinkles before our eyes and through our ears. By play's end we, too, want to give him some encouragement.

My only real disappointment was that I wish a few more seconds had elapsed between final scene and curtain call. Otherwise, director Grant McKernie showed he well deserves his position heading UO's Department of Speech.

U Theater is on a roll . . . and season tickets are still on sale. In the days of videovideovideoc, *Orphans* shows why theater remains a lively art form.

Postscript: The Terra Nova Theater production of two David Mamet plays, *The Shawl* and *Prairie du Chien*, has been cancelled.

DANCE

Dancer shows essence of emotions

Review by Stacey Levine

Between

Kiken Chin's characteristically slow movement dilates time and seems to address the question, "What happens to us in life?" by emptying the world of all except emotional absolutes.

Last Saturday's performance of *Between*, to an audience of about 100, incorporated six dancers, and was more ambitious, more complex, and less seamless than his two previous solo performances at the Hult Center.

The dancers—Craig Baker, Susan Brokaw, Terry Gregory, David Koteen, Jane Novick, and Caroline Weglin—are beautifully distinct, and their slowness is statuesque, commanding. Chin exploits the strengths and quirks of each, playing them well off one another: Gregory's knowing, sad and bemused expression, for instance, contrasts to Koteen's loose body and disturbed, baffled-looking face; and to Brokaw, who has both a supremely innocent facial expression and an eerie

distance to her movement.

At the piece's start, Chin, with his obvious delight at the notion of birth, rolls headfirst onto the stage. Slowly, the character stands up, awakens. Ecstatic, sensual, coy, cruel, grotesquely proud and self-absorbed, he is utterly unabashed about showing himself to us.

Then he is drawn into the world: the other dancers arrive, combining and recombining their personalities, their bodies. Each discovers the pain and happiness that will arise here in the world, for no one can exist outside of it, after all. The seven share and give to each other; they come together in troubled clots, commiserating, soothing, fighting, staring at one another, and at times there is a strange emotional withholding and sense of isolation. Perhaps *Between*'s greatest strength is to convey both our inseparability from the world and our essential solitude in it.

They repeatedly form diagonal

lines, holding hands; here, they are buoyant, smiling. This, and other formations like it, seem embarrassingly trite, though such saccharine happiness is continually undercut by sudden expressions of disappointment and horror.

Though visually engaging, the middle segment remains without identifiable hooks to draw the audience in; there seems to be no sustained emotional force behind these complex arrangements, and the effect is diffuse and tenuous compared to the streamlined force of the dance's first and last sections.

In the final duet, Baker's coy, dark expressions and movement challenge Chin's, and it's painfully clear that the two characters, discovering each other, then connecting, have no choice but to let their love flay them, and for one to suffocate and flay the other. For who hasn't been torn apart by the simultaneous existence and impossibility of love?

The two hold each other, struggling both to remain together and to tear apart. In the emotion of their touching and the tension of their not touching, they seem to know that the outcome will be tragic. In this segment of *Between*, linear time collapses; while the two are at their most intense struggle, we hear a recording of their voices laughing, squealing in perhaps both pleasure and pain. There is no beginning or end to love; it's one subsuming experience. What is most surprising is Chin's final expression at the end of the struggle, before the lights go down: unmistakable, unflinching joy over this unavoidable encounter and the ruin of love.

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